



## 20 Years of workplace bullying research: A review of the antecedents and consequences of bullying in the workplace

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### ABSTRACT

Research on workplace bullying, which has just recently passed the 20 year mark, has grown significantly over this duration of time. We provide an extensive review of the extant literature, with a focus on the antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying. We organize our review of the extant literature by level of analysis, which allows us to understand workplace bullying from each major level of analysis, while simultaneously identifying those levels at which research has been sparse. We then develop a conceptual model based on our review that similarly depicts theoretical and/or empirical findings from the extant literature, but in a succinct manner. Based on our review and conceptual model, we identify and highlight a number of key avenues for future research that will help extend the current workplace bullying literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, workplace bullying has emerged as an important area of research in management studies. While some researchers have suggested that even a 10% prevalence of workplace bullying warrants strong attention (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011), some studies have revealed that nearly 95% of employees have had some exposure to general bullying behaviors in the workplace over a 5-year period (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Moreover, forms of workplace incivility, such as bullying, entail significant consequences at multiple levels including the individual-, group-, and organizational-levels (Cortina, 2008). With over 20 years of research since the first study specifically investigating workplace bullying (Leymann, 1990), the workplace bullying literature has grown significantly and is sufficiently mature to warrant a comprehensive review of extant literature.

Researchers have investigated three important factors: prevalence, antecedents, and outcomes. Prevalence rates have varied internationally. In the U.S., researchers have reported a prevalence rate of nearly 50% (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007), while in Europe researchers have typically reported prevalence rates ranging from 5 to 10% (Einarsen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, researchers have identified workplace bullying as a phenomenon that has global prevalence and is an important issue for managers to consider across the world (Einarsen et al., 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Furthermore, researchers focusing on antecedents of bullying have predominantly explored dispositional variables such as personality (Coyne, Chong, Seigne, & Randall, 2003; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Glaso, Matthiesen, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2007; Persson et al., 2009) and demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Lewis & Gunn, 2007). At other levels, researchers have also investigated the influence of team autonomy (Arthur, 2011), leadership (Hoel, Glaso, Hetland, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2010), ethical climate (Bulutlar & Unler Oz, 2009), and national culture (Loh, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2010).

In order to organize our review of the literature, we focus on extant theoretical and empirical work according to the level of analysis. Within each level of analysis, we discuss key constructs that have been related to workplace bullying. More specifically, we discuss both the antecedents and consequences associated with bullying at each level. A review of this depth has not been published in a single article specifically focusing on workplace bullying. We believe that this paper can both serve as a comprehensive review of extant literature and stimulate future research based on the gaps identified.

In this paper, we present a levels-based review of the extant workplace bullying literature including the individual, group, organizational, and societal levels. We primarily focus on the antecedents and consequences of bullying at these levels. Second, we present a conceptual model that is developed to reflect our levels-based review. Third, we identify and discuss areas for future research that would build on and extend the workplace bullying literature. Fourth, we conclude with a discussion of the contributions of our paper.

## 2. Workplace bullying

### 2.1. Definition and features

While some studies solely rely on targets indicating whether they have experienced bullying or not, without using or providing a definition (e.g., Liefoghe & Davey, 2001), other researchers (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011) commonly use the following definition of workplace bullying:

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular

activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalated process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003, p. 15).

Through this definition, four broad features have been extracted to define workplace bullying. These features include frequency, persistency, hostility, and power imbalance (Einarsen et al., 2011; Monks et al., 2009). Frequency refers to the number of times per week that the negative behaviors are exhibited. Researchers vary on whether the minimum number of acts must be one or two per week (Einarsen et al., 2011). Persistency refers to the duration of time for which the negative behaviors are experienced. As with frequency, researchers vary on whether the minimum duration of exposure to negative acts must be six or twelve months (Einarsen et al., 2011). Hostility refers to the underlying negativity of the behaviors. Finally, power imbalance refers to the disparity in perceived power between the target and the perpetrator. This power can take a number of forms (e.g., physical, social-peer groups); thus, is not solely limited to hierarchical power (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002).

The first study of workplace bullying was published just over 20 years ago in 1990 by Heinz Leymann. In this study, Leymann (1990) found that the bullying behaviors that he had researched in the playground were similarly apparent in the workplace. Einarsen, Raknes, and Matthiesen (1994) subsequently investigated workplace bullying in Norway and found that bullying was indeed a prevalent phenomenon in organizations. The common scales that are now used to measure workplace bullying (e.g., NAQ – Einarsen et al., 1994; WB-C – Fox & Stallworth, 2005) contain a number of items listing negative behaviors that an employee may experience at work. These behaviors range from subtle acts such as gossip, personal jokes, withholding critical information, and ostracism (i.e., giving the silent treatment) to overt acts, such as insults, being told to quit one's job, and violence. The behaviors also range from work-related acts such as excessive workloads, criticism of work, and excessive monitoring of work to person-related forms such as belittling, personal jokes, and aggression. When a respondent indicates that he/she has experienced one or more of these behaviors on a frequent and persistent basis, researchers can conclude that he/she is a target of bullying (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Bulutlar & Unler Oz, 2009; Fox & Stallworth, 2010).

We focus specifically on the antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying because we believe that workplace bullying is distinct from other victimization-based constructs in a meaningful way (Tepper & Henle, 2011). To illustrate, the definition of workplace bullying requires the negative acts to be frequent (once or twice a week) and persistent (duration of six to twelve months). These definitional requirements suggest that bullying is a regular and ongoing phenomenon that will tend to have greater psychological implications than one-off acts of violence or aggression (Fox & Stallworth, 2010). Moreover, while abusive supervision solely consists of downwards vertical mistreatment (Tepper, 2007), workplace bullying includes mistreatment that can occur: 1) from supervisor to subordinate, 2) from subordinate to supervisor, 3) between co-workers, and 4) from customers/clients to employee (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Workplace bullying also ranges from subtle to overt acts, with subtle bullying behaviors being more common (Arthur, 2011; Fox & Stallworth, 2005). In contrast, violence and aggression are more often overt and easy to detect for others (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Therefore, we agree with Tepper and Henle's (2011) recent contention that forms of workplace mistreatment such as workplace bullying are sufficiently distinct and meaningful to be treated separately.

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